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FREIGHT VILLAGES AND SMEs, THE GREEK EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The research focused on the Greek situation in relation to freight villages and the SMEs involved in the transport market. The transport related SMEs have specific requirements for the development of freight villages, since they have certain capabilities and limitations. The necessity for creation of freight villages is well perceived by all involved actors, nevertheless legal, institutional, organisational, financial, technical, and physical problems exist. The SMEs are mainly concerned about the inner procedures of freight villages, such as availability/accessibility, reliability, security, organisation/management, and confidentiality.

INTRODUCTION

Problems encountered during the delivery of goods within Europe, either by air, sea, rail or road, leads most of the time to important delays, and so to the loss of money for the companies involved.

The creation of the so-called freight villages supports the transport of goods, especially in large cities and capitals. A freight village is a defined area within which all activities relating to transport, logistics and the distribution of goods, both for national and international transit, are carried out by various operators. Freight villages are open centers, which as minimum interconnect different transport modes (i.e. rail and road), provide access to transport corridors, locate transport enterprises, and offer telematic services. Emphasis is also given to the strategic locations of these villages, i.e. outside key cities, near commercial ports and airports, with easy access and connections. The aim is to free the large cities from the important truck passage by somehow monitoring the traffic. The freight villages offer all the facilities in order to accommodate the goods, the lorries and the drivers. These include warehouses, break-bulk centers, storage areas, offices, car parks, etc. The companies involved in the creation of the freight villages, have on-site offices with modern technologies and facilities.

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THE FREIGHT VILLAGE CONCEPT

It is well known, through everyday experience, that large trucks are involved in congestion problems when travelling in big cities. The solution proposed by the freight villages will be to enable the trucks to unload their goods and make the distribution to the neighbouring city, by using smaller trucks (either owned by the delivering company itself or by the freight village). Another problem encountered is the strike problem, leading to delays and even more seriously to the probable perishing of the goods. Freight villages therefore provide large cold stores and air-conditioned warehouses.

Near airports and commercial ports, the freight villages serve as national and international freight forwarders and logistics operators. The large surface area provided help on loading and unloading but also on a neat organisation. Several services are provided on-site both for drivers needs (telephones, bank, mail box, public weigh bridge, insurance companies, bar, restaurant, hotel, shops, etc.) and for the lorries (service station, washing station, maintenance and repair workshop, illuminated and guarded parking facilities, etc.) The transport services provided on each site, of course, depend on needs and on the major type of freight in transit in each freight village. Services such as palletting, labelling, packing, bag-cutting, silos loading, weighing with issuing of certificates, etc. are available.

It is imperative that a freight village is run by a single body, either public or private. Also, in order to comply with free competition rules, a freight village must allow access to all companies involved in the activities.

Several European countries have already their freight villages (Denmark, United-Kingdom, France, Spain and Italy) with other planing to join in. It is important to understand that the creation of more and more freight villages will promote an inter-European Corridor.

MAIN PROBLEMS FOR THE INTERMODAL CHAIN IN THE REGION

Freight Terminals

Many freight facilities are established in Greece. The definition of these facilities varies from one to another. The facilities that are operating in Greece are freight centres, intermodal facilities, storages, transport centres, ports, railway freight stations, distribution centres, etc. As a consequence, some people are not familiar with the freight village concept (in terms of logistics, organisation, and administration procedures), as it has been established in other European countries, unless they have interacted with some of them during their work outside the borders of Greece. Since the international transporters do business with 'colleagues' in other countries, the Greek companies have knowledge of the state-of-the-art freight facilities from their business experience outside of Greece. Perhaps they do not have information about the 'inner procedures' of the freight villages, but they definitely are aware of the operations since they counteracting as customers with the freight villages. Furthermore, someone who is not really aware of a concept is not capable to fully comprehend the subject. Thus, the realisation of the freight village concept (as a whole) is of high priority, especially for the Small & Medium Enterprises (mentioned hereafter as SMEs).

The freight village concept has been introduced in the Mediterranean countries long time ago. Freight Villages, under the European Freight Villages Network known as 'EUROPLATFORMS', are in operation in various locations around Europe.

Table 1 – Locations of EUROPLATFORMS facilities

ITALY	SPAIN	FRANCE
• Bologna	• Madrid	• Paris
• Napoli	• Sevilla	• Strasbourg
• Livorno	• Barcelona	• Rouen
• Parma	• Irun	• Boulogne/Mer
• Padova	• Burgos	• Bordeaux
• Verona	• Vitoria	• Valence
• Rivalta S.	• Bizkaia	• Bayonne
• Torino		• Marseille
• Novara		
• Milano		

It has to be noted that, a facility like the above mentioned does not exist in Greece.

There are many infrastructure problems in Greece, in relation mainly to facilities for freight transport. The existing facilities (such as port facilities) are operated by public organisations. The transport companies knowing the Greek reality along with the resulting problems, have formed 'storages' which are for their own use, therefore of a private nature. These storages are mostly created by big transport companies and not SMEs. The solution would be some SMEs to form a group and altogether to form such storages for their own use. Actually, this is the first step for the establishment of freight villages. The SMEs express their concerns in relation to the co-operation in such formulations, since they are working in the same market, thus they are competitors, and they can not conceive the terms of collaboration.

Many SMEs express their concerns towards issues of interim organisation, security, insurance, confidentiality, etc. in relation to the freight villages' functionalities. This fact is mainly due to their unfamiliarity with the 'inner procedures' of the freight villages.

Many transport operators (especially truck owners) object to the concept of freight villages establishment in Greece since they were afraid that their market share would be decreased. On the contrary, the freight forwarders are in favour of the freight village concept.

The infrastructure problems that exist in Greece are applicable to all involved parties, however the SMEs do not have alternative ways to resolve these problems and on the other hand the bigger companies have the means to face such problems. Therefore, the SMEs are sceptical of the development of freight villages in Greece.

No funds are currently allocated by the Greek Government to the development of freight villages due to 'legal' problems. The SMEs seriously concern about the private financing possibilities of the freight villages.

Rail Transport

One of the main elements in the intermodal chain is the railway transport. It is mentioned from the SMEs that, intermodal transport is not cost efficient for distances less than 1000 km, on an average. The Hellenic Railway Organisation, which is the railway operator in Greece (a public company), has the availability of the appropriate wagons on-time for short distances. For the long distances, though, problems exist, since different systems (tracks) are in operation in different parts of the country. Furthermore, as it is mentioned from both the Hellenic Railway Organisation and the transport companies, no intermodal transport is facilitated. This fact is due to lack of facilities/terminals and promotion/organisation. A new facility (outside Thessaloniki) is underway that could assist the situation, however, as it is planned, it will serve only as a wagon distribution centre.

The present situation is going to change in the near future. This is due to a new Greek law, that was voted recently from the Greek Parliament. Up to now, it was not permitted, by law, the public companies (like the Hellenic Railway Organisation) to have affiliated companies. Since this obstacle does not exist any more, the Hellenic Railway Organisation is planning to create forwarding cargo centres, etc. as affiliated companies in order to overcome the bureaucracy procedures of the public organisation.

Another problematic issue is the lack of an updated information system of the Hellenic Railway Organisation. The existing practice is the issue of the seasonal timetables (booklet), which unfortunately are not consistent with the real timetables since it is not updated information. This fact creates many problems in the transport companies' planning operations. It has to be mentioned at this point that, the Hellenic Railway Organisation does not even operate an on-line reservation system.

Lately the Hellenic Railway Organisation established a WWW page. This Internet service is going to be expanded, in terms of information and services contained, and it is expected to solve the current problems.

IDENTIFICATION OF BARRIERS TO SMEs' ACCESS TO THE INTERMODAL MARKET

Realisation of the Intermodal Market

There is a big confusion in relation to the definitions of the transport chain in Greece. Different organisations consider the transport chain from various perspectives and as a result, there is no standard identification of the transport chains used. Furthermore, in the Greek language there are no different words for the translation of 'intermodal', 'multimodal' and 'combined' transport.

Another issue is that various administrations/ authorities are involved in the transport chain. Local, regional, and national administrations, as well as various organisations are connected, one way or another, to the transport chain. Furthermore, their responsibilities and interests are many times contradicting. An example is given for the perception of the above comment: in order for a freight facility to be established, it has to be given the approval of the community and the region to be located; the Ministry of Transport; the Ministry of Public Works, Environment and Planning; as well as the public transport organisations involved. This example shows the magnitude of the existing problem and the necessary bureaucracy to overcome.

Intermodal transport is still not integrated in Greece. Many barriers exist towards this transportation system. The barriers are the following:

- Ignorance of the intermodal transport concept. It is a fact that a lot of SMEs are not familiar with intermodality issues. After explanation of the theory and presentation of examples, many of them agree that it might be a useful transport chain in some cases but not used as panacea.
- Truck status. In Greece many SMEs consist of truck operators. It is a fact that truck operators do not benefit from the intermodal transport. There is no financial or legislative support to the truck owners by the Greek Government. Generally, the problems that raise from the truck operators' point of view, are not directly related to the creation of the freight villages, but are mostly related to the Legislative aspects in Greece and in other European countries, leading of course to the economical aspect of the freight transport.
- National practices. Most of the national forwarders do their business in a primitive way. It is true that they might benefit from intermodal transport, therefore the only thing remaining to be done is to be informed properly and promote intermodal transport through marketing procedures.
- Costs. The costs of intermodal transport are relatively high, especially for SMEs. Hence, the transport SMEs, most of the times, select to ship their goods via one transport mode only.
- Greek transported products. The main transported goods are agricultural products, which, most of them, are sensitive to time and handling procedures. Intermodal transport is not faster and the handling procedures are more expensive than road transport. Furthermore, many of the agricultural products can not be put in standard units. Thus, the best transportation mean for these goods has been proven to be the truck.
- National distances. The average transported distances within Greece, due to the size of the country, is around 600 km. The intermodal transport is cost efficient for greater distances, therefore intermodal transport is seldom attractive for national transport.

- Greek topography. The country is consisted of many islands, where they mainly produce agricultural products. For the transportation between the islands and the mainland, multimodal transport is used. Intermodal transport is not used for three major constrains: (a) at least one point of the transport chain (the majority of the islands) does not have the appropriate terminal facilities, (b) the transported quantities are relatively small, and (c) the majority of the transported goods are agricultural products.

Organisational Issues

The following facts apply to the Greek situation:

- The problems derived from the lacking legislation on transport coordination issues result to obstacles at the transport chain.
- The operational problems are caused by the nonexistence of coordination between the different public transport organisations along with the absence of cooperation between public and private transport organisations/companies.
- In Greece, the major intermodal transport could be implemented by the three Greek major transport modes, which are road, rail and sea. At a national level, no freight and fleet monitoring system exists. The lack of tracking and tracing systems is the reason for not reliable goods transfer. Unfortunately, since the market is highly competitive, the transport operators do not cooperate between themselves for their activities.
- Variable costs differ considerably between modes, which is essentially due to variations in labour intensity, fuel consumption and economies of scale. In principle, the variable costs of road transport per unit are higher than those of rail or shipping, because lorries have less capacity, are more labour intensive and consume more fuel per unit carried. On the other hand, since it is much more expensive to maintain a port or rail terminal than it is to operate a lorry ramp, the fixed costs of road transport are much lower. Thus, the SMEs prefer to use road transport rather than intermodal transport in order to avoid the considerable terminal costs. The freight villages and the possible involvement of SMEs in them would decrease these costs for their account.
- Problems at the information flow exist as well. These problems are caused due to lack of a national information system, as well as infrastructure deficiencies.
- Problems exist at the information flow between the consignor, terminal and consignee. These problems of the information flow concern the times of shipment arrival and departure, cargo location, bureaucracy procedures, etc. These problems are related to either not existent, delayed or not precise information.
- The SME companies are facing extra problems since they are either not provided with the information they request or provided with a substantial delay. This is mainly due to prioritisation that is given to companies of a greater size.

- A good practice would be collecting the information about gathering small volumes of shipment, in such a way to create bigger volumes. This consists one of the SMEs requests, a practice which only a few of them utilise. It has to be mentioned, though, that such practices are very risky, since the market is highly competitive. Certain procedures and guidelines have to be implemented for safety purposes.
- The major means of communication for Greek SMEs, which are currently in operation, are telephone, fax and telex. Only a few SMEs use e-mail and only a very small number use Internet to receive or transmit information, mainly when they are communicating with companies in other countries. One of the main reasons for not adopting the new technologies is the insufficient background educational level.
- Among the barriers for SMEs towards transport telematics, the economical barriers rank highest. The SMEs have realised the importance and usefulness of telematics mainly because of the high competitive market.
- Concentrated firms may benefit from improvements of technical equipment, labour organisation, marketing activities or from a general reduction in overhead costs. The SMEs could realise such economies either through the simple enlargement of plant size (i.e. internal economies of scale) or through an economic relationship with other SMEs (external economies). This higher stage of 'social agglomeration' would enable SMEs to benefit from cheap large-scale purchasing, cheap credits and other cost advantages. Due to these savings, together with the short distances between SMEs and the scale economies inherent in large volume flows, agglomerations in the first instance become places of lower production and transport cost. These places could be organised as well so as to be called freight villages. Of course, the potential of deglomerative factors, such as rising land prices, exist and result in higher costs for agglomerated SMEs. A recent practice in Greece proves the above fact. As it was mentioned earlier, some transport companies created their own facilities/ storages at the Elefsina - Aspropyrgos area (near Athens). The land characterisation changed recently by law, therefore all the relevant establishments have to be moved to other areas.
- In Greece, as it is mentioned previously, the different transport modes are not co-ordinating their activities (schedules, etc.). As a consequence, there are no standardised procedures for the transport companies. The SMEs are the most affected of this situation, since they do not have the administration personnel, etc. to support their actions. All the transport businesses involved have to follow the practices of the transport operators, and therefore they do not adopt standard procedures, since the operators have different practices.
- The Greek SMEs, since they are not well familiar to the freight village concept, they are not acquainted with the administration structure within the freight village. Therefore, they can not express their opinion on the management information of the freight village, other than the security, availability, and accessibility functions of such a system.

Physical

The following topics apply to the Greek situation:

- * The costs of transport are influenced by regional concentrations of economic activity. Friction of distance causes people and firms to agglomerate, usually at places characterised by some initial locational advantage. These locations in Greece are Athens Metropolitan Area, Thessaloniki, Patras, and at a lower extent Heraklion and Volos. Agglomeration of activities enables a previously large number of spatially dispersed single-purpose trips to be replaced by multi-purpose trips, which, at least initially, reduces the overall volume of trips.
- * To sum up the overall effect of SMEs concentration, market areas expand, trade and traffic levels rise and regional specialisation is accentuated. As a result of progressive socio-economic development, the location of activities becomes less dependent on primary factors (i.e. natural resources) and increasingly influenced by secondary factors, i.e. internal and external economies. As a consequence, freight centres are formed. The SMEs express the view that the present locations of intermodal terminals are not the optimal ones.
- * Traffic settlements are locations for which transport is of particular significance, or have developed out of transport facilities. According to their specific transport functions, traffic settlements may take the shape of commercial transit stations, nodal centres for one or several transport modes, transshipment points and of port cities. The concept would seem to apply equally to such nodes as container ports, airports hubs or warehouse distribution centres.
- * One reason why transport businesses locate at transport settlements is because of their relatively high accessibility within the transport system. The principles of nodal accessibility and interconnectivity are well covered through the operation of freight villages. Evidently, good accessibility makes transport nodes especially favourable locations for transport or transport-intensive businesses. Therefore, SMEs would like to be established within such facilities, considering that certain requirements apply. Another reason may be that transport-related companies benefit from localisation economies.
- * It is widespread consensus that *bottlenecks* in transport flows are more decisive as limiting factors to regional development than overall levels of infrastructure provision. Herein lies the rationale for policies which aim to overcome bottlenecks, instead of creating a potential oversupply of infrastructure. Moreover, it is the use of infrastructure, rather than just its existence or capacity, which is critical. This means that many development objectives could be achieved by a better use or organisation of existing infrastructure, which is one of the arguments in favour of intermodal transport.
- * Similar to the concept of direct and indirect effects is that of construction and structuring effects of transport infrastructure. Construction effects concern the transitory multiplier effects inherent in any major construction project which disappear once the work is finished. Structuring effects, by contrast, represent the direct and indirect impacts from the long term operation of infrastructure.
- * An intermediate point may represent the least cost location at break-of-bulk facilities where goods are transhipped from one mode to another. The additional terminal costs due to transshipment causes an abrupt increase in transport costs from the points of origin and destination which is subsequently added to the freight rates from these locations. A business located at such an intermediate node, and especially for a SME, may be able to avoid one set of loading and unloading costs if the materials are supplied by one mode and dispatched by another direct from the plant. In this case, the intermediate location incurs lower total transport costs than either terminal point. Intermodalism thus has a distinct impact on

geography in that traffic nodes without resource endowments or other advantages may become preferred locations for certain economic activities.

Technical

The concept of 'time utility' is a relevant modifying factor, implying that goods are moved not only to a certain location, but also that they arrive there at a specific time. Whereas time utility, and, hence, time costs, were traditionally regarded as particularly important in passenger transport, the 'Just-in-Time' concept reflects the growing significance of the time factor in freight distribution during the last two decades. Economic value is thus attached not only to the simple movement between places, but also the characteristics of that movement, such as speed, comfort and reliability. The SMEs have difficulties in keeping the economic value to a lower rate than the bigger companies.

The barriers of the transport companies do not exist in the nonexistence or insufficiency of freight facilities, but to the access of SMEs in these public facilities. Many SMEs share the opinion that there is a tremendous bureaucratic procedure to be followed which is a financial burden to their operations.

It is common practice for both unimodal and intermodal operators to offer ancillary transit services (e.g. warehousing and packaging) in order to attract business. Transshipment nodes, such as ports, airports, railway terminals and road distribution depots therefore potentially become places of added value and, hence, of increased locational significance. Unfortunately SMEs face various barriers towards the utilisation of the existing public facilities. The SMEs express their interest in freight villages as an element of easy access to the facilities.

The most important categories of transport services that the freight village should facilitate, according to the Greek SMEs, are the following:

- Qualities of quantity, e.g. the ability to handle a particularly large or small number of goods;
- Qualities of time, e.g. speed, frequency, regularity, flexibility of schedules;
- Qualities relating to space and distance, e.g. the ability to form networks, to climb gradients or to negotiate obstacles;
- Qualities of safety and comfort, e.g. impact-resistant design, security;
- Qualities relating to the environment, e.g. the use of vehicles with low air and noise impacts;
- Equal opportunities, e.g. the treatment of all transport companies, no matter the size or importance, with the same overall policy objectives.

Legal Issues

Reflecting the significance of transport in the economy and society at large, the Greek Government tends to exert its influence on the development of different modes through policy and legislation. Measures of government control include vehicle and fuel taxes, licenses, subsidies, public ownership and regulation concerning speed, safety, employment, etc. Certain transport operators, the railways in particular, have been forced to provide some services for social rather than for commercial reasons. National operators (e.g. state-owned airline and railway) have often been protected from competition, but also restricted in their ability to restructure their businesses. The deregulation that is going to be imposed by the European Union Directives, is expected to introduce dramatic changes in the transport domain.

The EU's transport policy, on the one hand pursues deregulation, yet at the same time it effectively subsidises high-speed rail and combined transport in order to meet policy aims such as regional development and 'sustainable mobility'.

The Greek legislation does not include any articles for the establishment of freight villages, as enterprises operated by the transport companies involved in the freight village facilities. Lately this issue is under consideration, by the Greek Ministry of Transport, which is the responsible authority (by law) for the transport centres and relevant facilities.

The "Greek Chamber Association of Transport" is an association which has been lately formed by many Chambers all over Greece. The jurisdiction of this association is not really defined and a lot of problems are faced due to this fact.

The transport may be considered as a free market for the transport companies in Greece, even though some indirect factors affect the businesses. Of course, these factors are not in favour of the SMEs.

Financial

A first important distinction must be made between the cost incurred by the provider of transport and the price charged to the user. The determinants of transport price may be summarised in three broad categories:

- The cost characteristics of different modes and their networks;
- The structure of freight rates;
- The effects of location, specifically of agglomeration and regional specialisation.

The cost structure of different modes varies considerably, largely as a function of the proportion of fixed costs and variable costs. Fixed costs or 'terminal' costs represent the costs incurred in the operation and maintenance of transport facilities such as ports, railway stations and intermodal terminals. Since these costs are not directly related to the volume of flows, the SMEs that move lesser volumes from the bigger companies are charged a higher cost proportionally to the volume flows. Furthermore, the larger the volume of traffic using transport facilities and other fixed assets the lower the average fixed costs. Variable costs, by contrast, generally increase with the level of movement. The combination of terminal and variable costs results in a function of total transport cost, which generally is not in favour of the SMEs.

The investment for the implementation of freight villages is considerable, but the benefits to the society have to be evaluated. Many freight villages already operate in Europe. There are specific reasons (EU policies/directives) that make the creation of such facilities a necessity.

Several Greek SMEs (mainly forwarders) agree that freight villages in operation, with all the comforts for both the drivers/forwarders and the goods, is a good practice, but the main question is "who is financing such facilities".

The effects and measures taken in the transport sector for the purpose of regional development generally emerge only in the medium to long term. Short-term effects are rare. Most SMEs do not have the availability to finance a project and expect the rate of return in the long term.

The main conclusion is that the financial scheme preferred by the SMEs would be the infrastructure financing by the Government and the users of the infrastructure to rent the facilities and its services.

Most probably, it is the big initial investment that frightens the users, as well as the non-acquaintance of the users with the proposed facilities and services.

IDENTIFICATION OF SMES' REQUIREMENTS TO FREIGHT VILLAGES INFORMATION SYSTEMS

The SMEs need an Information System in order to better plan their activities. The scheduling of drivers, since labour is of high priority and expense, is a crucial necessity for the transport companies. The situation of the routes (unexpected phenomena, accidents, strikes, etc.) should be well advance known to the companies. If there was an information system that the transport companies could connect (log in) to, then the companies would benefit highly by it.

The physical location of the information system is of no importance to the SMEs. The operator/manager of the information system is of importance to the SMEs, thus a lot of thought has to be made for this aspect.

A concern of the SMEs is the problematic area of orders' clustering. It would be a good practice to include in a database all the information of orders, users, etc.

In Greece, no fleet management and monitoring system currently exists, to include all the information. The freight village could embrace this activity, which the SMEs accept as an organisational structure.

Modern intermodality is essential the result of organisational, regulatory and logistical changes following the technical innovation of containerisation. Whereas containerisation represents the transport hardware, intermodality stands for the concept of intermodal organisation and management of flows.

In contrast to unimodal systems, intermodalism relies heavily on the co-ordination of different modes, the co-operation of their operators and on the interface facilities where goods are transhipped from one mode to another. Of critical importance, therefore, are the transshipment nodes where much of the intermodal co-operation takes place. Thus, the logistic capacities within the freight village are of principal significance. These logistic capacities should include availability, security, and accessibility issues specifically tailored to the SME's needs.

Time constraints and other limiting factors limit most forms of spatial interaction, with the important exception of modern telecommunication. As a general rule, the level of interaction reduces with increasing distance. The newly introduced telematic interfaces contribute to the more appropriate integration of the SMEs in the functionalities of freight villages.

As a summary, the main SMEs requirements of data to be included in a general information system, are the following:

- **Routes.** Information about the possible transport chains.
- **Space availability.** Information about the possibility to transport with the indicated transport means.
- **Timetables.** Information about arrivals and departures of the transportation modes.
- **Costs.** Information about the tariffs.
- **Reservations.** Availability to book spaces through the information system.
- **Tracking and tracing.** Information about the location of their transported goods.
- **Freight Village.** Information about the location, facilities, services, etc. of the freight village.

- **Traffic conditions.** Traffic information, such as slow traffic, bottlenecks, incidents, road works, etc.
- **Weather.** Information about weather conditions and weather forecasts, visibility, etc.
- **Trip planning.** Information about road assistance, locations of accommodations, restaurants, gas stations, parking, banks, hospitals, etc. along with the relevant costs.
- **Administration.** Information about legislation, bureaucracy, customs, documentation, etc.

The SMEs requirements of communication media to be used are the following:

- **telephone/ fax** (for updated/ real time data)
- **printed material** (for static data)
- **Internet** (for real time data)

Main issues of concern in relation to the freight villages operation for the SMEs are the following:

- ❖ **Availability/ Accessibility**
- ❖ **Reliability**
- ❖ **Security**
- ❖ **Organisation/ Management**
- ❖ **Confidentiality**

The above mentioned points present the Greek SME's requirements for the data to be included in the freight village information system. The needs that the SMEs mentioned are according to their every day business. It is true that they are not aware of the technological part of implementation but they mentioned the data they would really like to know when they are planning their activities. Naturally, when they describe their requirements they are not concerned about the implementation procedures.

Some points may seem irrelevant but after thorough examination it is easily understood the essence of them. As an example, the weather forecast the SMEs requested may appear as not essential. The weather forecast, though, is in relation to the traffic/ road conditions and in relation to the storage places. Since goods are transported to various climates, the SMEs would like to be aware of the weather conditions that exist throughout their route. Especially, conditions of snow, heavy rain/ floods, and fog are of high interest conditions for truck drivers. Another point is that, for freight facilities that do not have covered storages, such as the Athens airport, weather conditions (such as rain) are highly important depending on the kind of transported goods and the kind of packaging.

POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS & SOLUTIONS THAT MAY HELP OVERCOMING SMEs' BARRIERS

The SMEs are willing to participate in a freight village when a legal framework exists for such an establishment. The broad definition that is accepted is the following: "The freight village provides an intersection of two or more different transport modes at which independent transport and distribution companies and other transport-intensive businesses are located on a designated site. The spatial concentration of logistics activities is intended to enhance co-operation between transport modes and companies so as to improve the commercial and environmental efficiency of goods distribution in a town or a region."

It is widely known that a lot of companies agree on an initiative, but when it comes to financial issues it is a different occasion. The proper way to deal with this issue, would be to undertake a

'stated preference survey'. Of course, experience from relevant establishments in Europe exists, and it would be of great help to utilise them.

As a conclusion, the SMEs would accept a freight village establishment, and would utilise it after a while (always an initial time for acceptance is required). In relation to cost, as it is mentioned earlier, it would be difficult to estimate the accepted value. It has to be taken into consideration the fact that the SMEs do not have large funds for planning purposes. The transport SMEs need short or medium term results, since they do not have the luxury to finance projects that will have long term benefits.

The SMEs' needs are numerous. Their main interest is to keep themselves in operation in an extremely antagonistic market that changes from day to day. Towards this goal they have a lot of disadvantages against the big companies. In order to 'survive' in the highly competitive transport market the SMEs propose the following:

- Better integration of the transport modes.
- Improved level of service.
- Overcome the existing barriers for SMEs.
- Improved overall information flow.
- Development of freight village network.
- Establishment of articles in Greek Legislation for intermodal transportation and freight villages.

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